Political and Social Sciences Department

# Scepticism, Liberalism and Illiberalism:

## An Inquiry into the Implications of Doubt

PETR LOM

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# Scepticism, Liberalism and Illiberalism: An Inquiry into the Implications of Doubt

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**Scepticism, Liberalism and Illiberalism:**

*An Inquiry Into The Implications of Doubt*

In *Human all too Human*, Nietzsche writes:

> Probable victory of scepticism. - Let us for once accept the validity of the sceptical point of departure: if there were no other, metaphysical world and all explanations of the only world known to us drawn from metaphysics were useless to us, in what light would we then regard men and things? This question can be thought through, and it is valuable to do so...For the historical probability is that one day mankind will very possibly become in general and on the whole in this matter; thus the question becomes: what shape will human society then assume under the influence of such an attitude of mind?[1]

Today, this question about scepticism is an important one. On both the Left and the Right, whether it be among proponents of postmodernism, communicative ethics, natural right or communitarianism, there is widespread consensus that traditional justifications for our liberal democratic way of life, be they appeals to either transparent reason, nature, or religion, have become problematic. We thus ought to reflect upon our uncertainties and ask Nietzsche's question: what would a world full of doubt be like? What are the moral and political implications of scepticism?

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**Negative Uncertainties:**

At first glance, the answer to this question seems unproblematic. Scepticism, the doubt about the possibility of rationally justifying moral and political belief, seems a purely negative position.[2] It calls into question beliefs and finds justifications for them wanting, but provides nothing to replace them: doubt is merely corrosive. Thus, scepticism has no positive implications at all, for itself it does not generate any moral or political principles to guide moral or political life.

To point to the absence of moral or political implications of scepticism is not new.[3] In fact, it is often remarked that scepticism's negativity is even more radical. Any existence always requires some kind of moral judgement, which scepticism by definition - as a state of doubt, or suspension of all judgement, prevents. Thus, if one tried to follow the sceptic and suspend all judgement, one could never make any decision, nor act at all. Scepticism would make *any* kind of life impossible. This is Hume's famous



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criticism. He writes: "all discourse, all action would immediately case; and men remain in total lethargy" were total scepticism to prevail, in fact, "all human life [would] perish."[4] A similar criticism is made by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. In a chapter devoted to the life of Pyrrho, the original Greek sceptic, Diogenes observes that because of his thorough doubts, whether of his perceptions of oncoming wagons or cliffs, or his evaluative judgements, whether or not he should avoid precipices or oncoming wagons, Pyrrho was not able to make any decisions at all. Consequently, Pyrrho took "no precaution, but faced all risks as they came, whether carts, precipices, or dogs," and was able to live only because of his friends, who kept him out of harm's way.[5]

But despite these arguments, there is still debate about scepticism's implications. In fact, today it is more often argued that scepticism leads to either illiberal or liberal political conclusions than none at all.



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**Scepticism and Illiberalism.**

The general argument tying scepticism to illiberalism is the following: scepticism is dangerous because it corrodes the beliefs necessary to sustain liberalism. It undermines both faith in the value and justifiability of a liberal democratic way of life as well as the ability to defend it against those who oppose it. Scepticism thus prepares the way for illiberalism by giving no principled reasons to raise against such opponents. Moreover, scepticism is also dangerous because it frees the will from moral restraint, or as Aristocles of Messina already asked the Pyrrhonist sceptic two thousand years ago, "what evil deeds would not he dare, who held that nothing is really evil, or disgraceful, or just or unjust?"[6]

Contemporary positions about the dangers of scepticism appeal to various elements of this general argument. Some of these claims are historical ones. For example, Richard Tuck claims that in the history of 17th century political thought, scepticism led to the elevating of self-preservation, and thus civil peace,



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as the one indubitable principle around which political life could be organized, "and if there is a set of political techniques available which can be used to secure civil peace...then those techniques must be used by the state or the prince, and no general moral or legal principles have any standing against them."[7] Here moral and religious scepticism "was often linked with a programme of what we would take to be excessive ideological repression."[8] Tuck notes that seventeenth century sceptics, particularly Charron or Descartes, were attracted to a radically prudential politics, as is demonstrated by their enthusiasm for the thought of Machiavelli. In this case, Aristocles' prediction seems to come true: in a sceptical world, what is politically permissible becomes radically expanded.

Tuck points to the illiberalism of some seventeenth century sceptics only to indicate that scepticism has not always been historically accompanied by toleration. A more strident claim tying scepticism to illiberalism is made by the conservative thinker Leo Strauss. Although Strauss' approach to political theory is completely different, and his argument world's apart



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from the Cambridge historical methodology of Tuck, Strauss agrees with Tuck's conclusion about the potential illiberal implications of scepticism. Moreover, for Strauss, scepticism is not merely potentially dangerous, but rather, *always* dangerous.

Strauss's argument reflects the influence of Plato and Nietzsche. Strauss follows Plato's teaching of the cave in *The Republic:* all political societies are ruled by myths or lies which provide their legitimacy, shadows dancing upon the walls of the cave. He claims that "every political society that ever has been or ever will be rests on a particular fundamental opinion which cannot be replaced by knowledge and hence is of necessity a particular and particularistic society."[9] Consequently, Enlightenment faith in reason and universal questioning will culminate in scepticism, for it will reveal these legitimizing principles as merely shadows. Moreover, according to Strauss, once it is politicized, or universalized, this scepticism will decay into a cluster of related dogmatic beliefs: an unquestioning acceptance of relativism, historicism and positivism. This is Strauss's diagnosis of a present



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"crisis of the West": the West has become dangerously crippled by fundamental doubts about its own legitimizing principles.

Strauss' argument also reflects Nietzsche's influence. And according to Nietzsche, scepticism can be dangerous in two ways. The first - an argument to which Strauss does not appeal - is a variation on the ancient criticism of scepticism found in Diogenes Laertius through Hume: scepticism is dangerous because it makes life psychologically impossible. Doubt is "the great blood-sucker, the spider scepticism," which leads to the "paralysis of the will."[10] Second, Nietzsche indicates there is also another kind of scepticism. One type of doubt may be psychologically destructive, but the other, a "more dangerous and harder form of scepticism", unleashes and frees the will, for it finds all moral beliefs merely, in Nietzsche's famous words, pleading for prejudices. The will, not reason, is fundamental.[11] And so, in Nietzsche's notorious formulation, if nothing is forbidden, then everything is permitted. Or as Strauss writes, following Nietzsche, "if our principles have no other support



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than our blind preferences, everything a man is willing to dare will be permissible."[12]

Strauss's conclusion is not unlike the position Tuck attributes to seventeenth century sceptical illiberals: by raising doubts about moral principles, scepticism vastly opens up the realm of the politically possible. But are these arguments convincing?

Let us begin with Strauss' argument. Here we find a number of elements which make a *necessary* link between scepticism and illiberalism less plausible. First, we should be careful to distinguish doubt from denial, scepticism from nihilism. Strictly speaking, scepticism is only a state of doubt. Sextus Empiricus emphasizes this point in the beginning his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. He differentiates the sceptic from both those who "think they have discovered the truth" and those who claim that there is no truth, "that things cannot be apprehended."[13] Arguments attributing illiberal consequences to scepticism are often not sufficiently attentive to this distinction. Nietzsche's claim - which inspires Strauss - that nothing is forbidden, or Aristocles' formulation, that there is no



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justice, no good or evil, are both positions committed to the position that no valid moral principles exist. The sceptic, to the contrary, is only in a state of doubt - uncertain whether there are, or are not, valid moral principles which govern the world.

This clarification, of course, is not enough to exonerate scepticism from illiberal associations. "Nothing is forbidden" may be grounded in nihilism rather than only scepticism, but if scepticism is an inherently unstable category, as we have observed, then it should not be surprising that doubt may be transformed into denial, that scepticism slips into nihilism. Scepticism would still remain the source of this nihilism (consistent with Strauss' warning that scepticism will always transform itself into varieties of stronger dogmatic positions.) Moreover, it is still possible to interpret the proposition "nothing is forbidden," not as the stronger, and dogmatic, position of the nihilist, but as a sceptical one - that whether or not anything is forbidden is only radically uncertain, not categorically denied. In either case, transformed into nihilism or not, scepticism still



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remains the premise of the argument that leads to the illiberal conclusion, nothing is forbidden.

What is more important, however, is to be careful about what we mean by conclusions following from premises. "Nothing is forbidden" may or may not be a sceptical proposition. But there are two equally logical conclusions which can be derived from this premise. The first is Nietzsche's: everything is permitted. But the second, and equally as logical conclusion, is that *nothing* is permitted, because *nothing* is justified.[14] To unequivocally claim that scepticism naturally leads to illiberalism fails to acknowledge that scepticism can as logically radically open possibilities of action as well as restrict them.

Strauss' argument tying scepticism to illiberalism not only confounds the necessary with the possible, but also places inordinately high demands on philosophy. For to claim that scepticism will unleash action rather than restrict it is based on a misplaced assumption about philosophy's power - that philosophy can have a proselytizing role, that it can restrain the vicious and make the just. We should remember Aristotle's



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lesson at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* - the instruction of ethics will only be effective to those who are already predisposed to learn it in the first place: philosophy cannot do more than that, it cannot change underlying motivation. Thus, scepticism may lead to an unleashing of the will only if one is not predisposed to morality in the first place, if one has no desire to be just. Otherwise, scepticism might create doubts about the *content* of moral belief, but it will leave *underlying motivation* to demand such belief intact. If we accept as unrealistic an expectation that the presence of moral principles might change the motivations of a potential tyrant, equally so, we should accept that scepticism about such principles will be irrelevant to such a monster as well: they would have acted in such a manner in any case. This understanding of the limits of philosophy tames helps tame the fear of scepticism.

We can then turn to Tuck's argument. First, his historical account is itself not without controversy. Tuck claims doubt led seventeenth century sceptics thinkers to rely upon prudence in their political



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reflections. But while his claim may be true in the neo-Stoic thought of Lipsius, it is far more disputable for those who self-defined themselves as sceptics - Charron and Descartes. In these latter two thinkers, one must be careful not to confound prudence with Machiavellian cunning. In Charron, prudence is not an amoral or immoral calculus. Charron, instead, seems to follow the classical conception of prudence, as it appears for example, in Aristotle's treatment in the *Nicomachean Ethics* - as inextricably tied to justice. It is the art of knowing what course of action is best for oneself and for others: prudence supplies the means while justice offers the end. Unlike, Machiavelli, Charron emphasizes that justice is one of the cardinal virtues every prince must have - in addition to piety, courage and mercy. He writes that "one must find abominable those tyrannic and barbarous words which free Sovereigns from all law, reason, equity and obligation."[15] He does admit that "sometimes it is necessary for [the ruler's justice] to bend and deviate, to mix prudence with justice, and as one says, to sew to the skin of the lion, if it does not suffice,



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the skin of the fox," and writes (as Tuck quotes) that the Prince may:

> secretly dispatch and put to death, or otherwise without forme of justice some certain man that is troublesome and pernicious to the state, and who well deserveth death, but yet cannot without trouble and danger be prevented and repressed by ordinary measures; herein nothing but the form is violated. And is not the prince above forms?[16]

Still, though the prince may be above forms, he is not above justice. Charron is emphatic that only in the greater service of justice may the ruler deviate from it. And on those exceptional occasions, the ruler must understand the tragic nature of his responsibility and act only with "regret and unhappy sighs, understanding that it is a tragedy, and a disgraceful blow from heaven."[17] Finally, Charron warns that a ruler's worst error is to begin thinking that everything he can do or desire is permitted, for that is "the murderer of the prince and the state."[18]

Descartes' interest in Machiavelli is equally ambiguous as that of Charron. Despite Tuck's interpretation, while it is true that Machiavelli is one of the only political writers to whom Descartes refers, and while he begins his considerations of *The Prince* by saying it includes "numerous principles which



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appear to [him] extremely good", his ultimate conclusions on Machiavelli are not simply laudatory. Descartes faults Machiavelli for not distinguishing between rulers who have gained power through legitimate or illegitimate means, and writes that "those who begin to found [regimes] through crime are ordinarily constrained to continue to commit crimes, and would not be able to maintain [their rule] if they wished to be virtuous." Even more importantly, Descartes takes issue with Machiavelli's dictum that a ruler must learn to be evil. He denies both that the ruler should dispense with acting on moral principle and that the world is as dark as Machiavelli claims. While Descartes allows a prince to act as he pleases towards foreign enemies either with "artifice or force", following Machiavelli's dictum of being the lion or fox as circumstances dictate, he still maintains that one has a "right" to do so - not that to act in this way is done simply out of necessity. Furthermore, he still places moral limits on foreign affairs, for example forbidding that friendship be feigned as a tool of



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diplomacy, because "friendship is a thing too sacred."[19]

Still, history aside, we need to examine the logic of the argument joining seventeenth century scepticism to illiberalism. Tuck claims that here scepticism led to the questioning of all moral belief, and that out of these doubts, only self-preservation and its concomitant political expression, maintenance of civil peace emerged as a stable value. And scepticism allows for a radically prudential politics in the name of this value: everything is permitted in order to establish peace. But here again, scepticism allows for two logical possibilities, it can both restrain and unleash action. While the non-sceptical belief in the cardinal importance of peace may pull towards unleashing action, the countervailing demand for justice - which Charron especially recognizes - would lead, instead, to its radical constriction. To be fair, Tuck recognizes this conceptual link between scepticism and illiberalism need not be a necessary one, for he sees two distinct paths leading from scepticism: scepticism points not only to prudential politics but also to an observance



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of custom and the laws of one's society - an observance that is consistent with a sceptical restriction of action: one cannot decide how to act in principle, therefore tradition becomes the default line of action.[20]

Our reflections on sceptical illiberalism thus end on an ambiguous note. Strauss' concerns about scepticism's illiberal conclusions may be unduly dark, and Tuck's historical account may be disputable, but this does not mean that scepticism cannot lead to illiberal consequences. However, such consequences are not necessary ones. We can now see that there are additional - and unquestioned assumptions - involved in attributing necessary illiberal conclusions to scepticism.

**Scepticism and Principle: Liberalism and Cruelty**

Let us then turn to the opposite position. How is scepticism seen to be allied with liberalism? Here again there are a number of different arguments. The first is the proposition that scepticism, in fact, may



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generate a positive moral and political principle. This is the argument of the late political theorist Judith Shklar, and one that has been more recently taken up by Richard Rorty.[21] She argued there are limits to scepticism, and that one principle - and indeed the only universal moral principle - resistant to doubt is the principle of cruelty, or rather, the hatred of cruelty. Shklar based her liberalism of fear on this principle, a "*summum malum*, which all of us know and would avoid if only we could. That evil is cruelty and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself."[22]

Shklar traced the origins of this liberalism to post-Reformation Europe and the cruelties of religious wars, and to those thinkers, such as Montesquieu, and more particularly Montaigne, who "torn by conflicting spiritual impulses, became skeptics who put cruelty and fanaticism at the very head of the human vices."[23] She claims skepticism about Christian dogma, which saw cruelty much differently because of its presuppositions of the fallen nature of man, the consequent necessity of sin and suffering and so-justified political



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practices of torture, led Montaigne to see cruelty as the universal vice.[24]

In Shklar's evaluation, fear of cruelty can become a "first principle, an act of moral intuition based on ample observation."[25] And this principle can then underwrite a liberalism of fear "if the prohibition of cruelty can be universalized and recognized as the necessary condition of the dignity of persons."[26]

Nonetheless, Shklar recognized the problems in attempting to derive a moral principle on the basis of doubt - she cautioned that while the liberalism of fear developed historically out of scepticism, such a liberalism need not be based upon it. For the difficulty with attempting to generate principles on the basis of doubt, is that doubt may extend even further and undermine this principle itself.

Nietzsche, of course, forms the strongest objection to Shklar, as she herself recognized: he raises doubts about the status of cruelty and comes to radically different conclusion's about its value.[27] But even in Montaigne's thought, there is more ambiguity



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about the relation between scepticism and cruelty than on Shklar's own interpretation.

In his essay *On Cruelty*, Montaigne writes that he "cruelly hates cruelty, both by nature and by judgement, as the extreme of all vices."[28] And while Shklar may be correct that scepticism led Montaigne to hold cruelty as the worst vice, his scepticism does not seem to stop there. To the contrary, in the same essay, he further subjects this position on cruelty to even greater doubt. And here he observes that both his nature and judgment do not provide him with the certainty for which Shklar would hope. He observes that human bloodthirstiness gives "proof of a natural propensity toward cruelty."[29] People may hate cruelty, but part of human nature also attracts them to it. Moreover, considering the Stoic model of the virtues, Montaigne wonders whether virtue requires "difficulty and contrast, and cannot be exercised without opposition," and considers that perhaps perfect virtue is "dependent upon combating pain." Thus, evil and perhaps even cruelty are necessary.[30] Finally, his scepticism even takes him to question the fear of



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cruelty itself. Following the ancient sceptics who claimed that what causes us suffering more than anything are our fears, fears which are based upon opinion, and which can be radically tamed through the sceptical expurgation of opinion,[31] Montaigne writes that philosophy can free us from our fear of pain and death, for "what makes us endure pain so poorly is that we are not accustomed to find our principal contentment in the soul, and that we do not concentrate enough on it." And while he concedes that Pyrrho is wrong in thinking that all pain can be conquered, he writes that "it is in us, if not to annihilate [pain], at least to lessen it by patience, and even should the body be disturbed by it, to maintain nevertheless our soul and reason in good trim."[32] Montaigne offers the cruel sounding admonishment that "we do not escape philosophy by stressing immoderately the sharpness of pain and the weakness of man."[33]

One might object that these passages should be read as ironic (an objection entirely in the spirit of Montaigne's own motto, that "each thing has many angles and many lights" and that "every medal has its



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reverse."[34]) But however one chooses to interpret Montaigne's intention, the lesson remains that these passages can be used to show how scepticism can lead to very different kinds of conclusions about the nature of cruelty.

**The Ambiguities of Doubt**

The example of the relation between cruelty and doubt thus further points to scepticism's ambiguities. One reason why scepticism may lead to very different implications is that what is doubted is not always the same - the extent and focus of scepticism is variable, as may be the motivation which guides it, as we have seen in arguments about sceptical illiberalism. This, in itself, is not a very interesting observation. What is more interesting is to reflect why doubt's extent varies from thinker to thinker - especially among these thinkers who self-characterize themselves as sceptics. This variability becomes more comprehensible if we recall our initial observations about the instability of scepticism - that an absolute or thorough scepticism



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is not possible. The nature of doubt thus guarantees that scepticism will always be expressed as a mixture of doubt and belief. Behind every sceptic there will always be non-sceptical belief.

Moreover, attentiveness to this mixture of doubt and belief becomes important in understanding how scepticism can lead to different political conclusions. For example, Judith Shklar was well known for her scepticism.[35] Her scepticism was both political and philosophical. She was a political sceptic because she held profound suspicions about those who wield power. Her thought was also governed by a deeper scepticism, one that extended not only to suspicion of power, but also to a scepticism about human reason, that through scepticism we see "that our judgements are made in the dark and doubts they are right."[36] But Shklar was certainly not just a sceptic. Though she was often described as a sceptic and self-characterized herself in this way, there are many beliefs she held alongside her doubts about which she was not sceptical, among which is not merely her belief in the absolute and universal nature of the vice of cruelty - but also a



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general commitment to liberal politics, especially to the defence and advocacy of the powerless, the proclaimed goal of her liberalism of fear.[37] And it is in the service of these undoubted liberal goals, that Shklar engaged her scepticism.

Thus, we see that not only is scepticism accompanied by belief, but that it is also used for a particular non-sceptical purpose. And there are many examples here apart from Shklar. The ancient sceptics, for example, marshaled all of their doubt in order to arrive at *ataraxia*, or spiritual tranquillity - a goal to which they did not extend their doubts. But perhaps the best example which illustrates how the conclusions of scepticism will depend upon the purpose for which it is raised, comes from 17th century religious debates. Here scepticism was used both as evidence in support religion as well as atheism.[38] We are used to the argument joining scepticism to atheism (and in fact, today we usually assume that scepticism is anti-religious): doubt calls religion into question, scepticism corrodes the revealed truths of revelation. But at the same time, Fideists - such as Charron -



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argued that scepticism, to the contrary, supports Religion. Scepticism reveals to man the poverty of his intellectual capabilities. Because one knows so little, it would be *hubris* of the highest order to doubt the Church's teaching or authority; scepticism thus points to religious submission. Scepticism can thus lead to radically different conclusions - and where it leads depends on the intention with which it is wielded.

And so, controversy exists about scepticism's implications because it is an undetermined, abstract category, and, to use a metaphor from Tocqueville, "an abstract word is like a false bottom; you may put in it what ideas you please and take them out again unobserved."[39] But debate exists about scepticism' implications not only because doubt is accompanied by beliefs and purposes which are often not recognized by commentators, or even self-acknowledged by self-described sceptics. A further reason is due to the unstable nature of scepticism itself. One cannot be sceptical about everything all the time, and so doubt has a necessary tendency to become other things, to slip into varieties of affirmation and denial, bringing



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with it different kinds of moral and political conclusions.

**Scepticism and Toleration**

We should now better understand other arguments linking scepticism and liberalism. The most common way in which scepticism is tied to liberalism is through sceptically generated moral pluralism. The moral pluralist holds there is no one overarching value system which governs the universe, rather there are many, and there is no way in which one can rank one system as superior to the other. Or as Isaiah Berlin writes:

> pluralism entails that, since it is possible that no final answers can be given to moral and political questions, or indeed any questions about value, and more than that, that some answers that people give, and are entitled to give, are not compatible with each other, room must be made for a life in which some values may turn out to be incompatible.[40]

The premise of the moral pluralist is indeed a sceptical one, as other contemporary writers make even more explicit than Berlin. For example, Bruce Ackerman writes:

> But can we *know* anything about the good? Sure, all of us have beliefs; but isn't it pretentious to proclaim one's *knowledge* on the subject? Worse than pretentious - isn't it some loud fool



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typically the first to impose his self-righteous certainties on others? Rather than welcoming such certainties, they should be taken as a sign that your intellectual arteries are hardening...the hard truth is this: there is no moral meaning hidden in the bowels of the universe."[41]

And in fact, recognition of wide varieties - and seemingly irreconcilable - moral beliefs is one of the fundamental sources of the historical development of scepticism. Sextus Empiricus gives long lists of differing moral customs, habits and religious belief.[42] Similarly, Montaigne - often repeating Sextus' own lists, famously asks, "what am I to make of a virtue that I saw in credit yesterday, that will be discredited tomorrow, and that becomes a crime on the other side of the river? What of a truth that is bounded by these mountains and is falsehood to the world that lives beyond?"[43]

But to move from recognition of pluralism as an empirical fact to advocating it as a moral value involves more than just scepticism. Sometimes these beliefs are explicitly acknowledged. For example, Isaiah Berlin affirms a belief both in the moral value of liberalism and pluralism, and claims that "he believes passionately in human rights."[44]



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Another contemporary liberal makes a similar claim. Brian Barry writes that:

> the sheer weight of the evidence in favour of scepticism seems overwhelming. It is hard not to be impressed by the fact that so many people have devoted so much effort over so many centuries to a matter of the greatest moment with so little success in the way of securing rational conviction among those not initially predisposed in favor of their conclusions.[45]

He argues that scepticism is necessary to a neutral constitution of the principles of justice, but again he is careful to point out that this scepticism must be supplemented by a "commitment to finding reasonable terms of agreement" if it is to generate the principle of neutrality which he aims to make the basis of justice.[46]

In other cases, we need to do more interpretive work to identify the particular mixture of doubt and belief that make up a thinker's brand of scepticism. For example, in order to understand Montaigne's plea for tolerance, that he is "as ready as you please to acquit another man from sharing my conditions and principles"[47] we have to consider not only his emphasis on the fundamental importance of peace, but also his affirmations of the nascent modern value of the individual, especially the moral duty of individual



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self-betterment, and the moral role of friendship. Citing the example of Socrates, Montaigne claims that we ought to work on our own endless infirmities before we censure others, that "our judgement, laying upon another the blame which is then in question, should not spare us from judging ourselves," and that we should always remember this saying of Plato: "If I find a thing unsound, is it not because I myself am unsound."[48] Montaigne also claims that tolerating differences and freely challenging them are a necessary part of both self-improvement and friendship, that "contradictions of opinions neither offend nor affect me; they merely arouse me and exercise me,"[49] and that to "offend a man for his own good is to have healthy love for him."[50]

Sometimes, however, the beliefs and doubts which together make up a thinker's scepticism are not self-acknowledged, and this leads to even greater controversy about scepticism's implications. Here the best example is Richard Rorty, who today makes the strongest case for the benefits of scepticism. Rorty advocates a philosophy of ironism, which as a doubt



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about the rational justifiability of philosophical principles, is very similar to scepticism.[51] He claims this doubt "helps make the world's inhabitants more pragmatic, more tolerant, more liberal."[52] But Rorty is not sufficiently explicit about the beliefs accompanying his ironism - the beliefs which make the link from his ironism or scepticism to toleration, and so often confounds and frustrates his commentators. Many of his critics point that alongside his ironism, or scepticism, his three part claim that all moral propositions are merely "final vocabularies," culture bound expressions which are neither final nor can be understood nor even usefully spoken of as mirroring reality, are other premises inconsistent with his irony because they are unquestioned - his materialism, historicism and his Shklar-inspired belief in the vice of cruelty.[53] And it is particularly this last premise - Shklar's claim that cruelty is the one universal vice which makes the link between Rorty's ironism and toleration: ironism leads to toleration because it is a liberally motivated ironism, an ironism that does not



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question it dedication to expanding the prevention of cruelty.

**Scepticism and Character**

But if we now better understand why scepticism can be interpreted as leading to such widely different political principles, why it is, as Shklar describes, such an "intellectually flexible" category, we should still consider if there is another way scepticism might be more directly linked to politics.[54] Granted the difficulties in trying to generate principles from scepticism itself, whether it is cruelty or toleration - and seeing that such conclusions always depend on accompanying non-sceptical beliefs, perhaps it is more fruitful to look at scepticism not as a philosophical position, but rather as a psychological attitude - in the spirit of Shklar's emphasis on political psychology in the study of political theory.[55] Does scepticism have a transformative function over human character, and is it likely to shape human beings in some ways more than others?



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Judith Shklar claimed there is a "psychological connection" between scepticism and liberalism."[56] She argued this psychological link is based upon a modesty or humility likely to be generated by doubt. She is not the only one to make such a claim. Surprisingly, Leo Strauss, for example, despite his greater relative fears about the dangers of doubts, paradoxically concurs with Shklar. In his writings on education, he claims that liberal education is to culminate with an intellectual modesty that is a form of philosophical scepticism: recognition that fundamental human problems will always lie at odds between the solutions offered by religion and philosophy. Liberal education is thus "training in the highest form of modesty, not to say of humility."[57]

There is also further evidence in the history of scepticism. Sextus Empiricus tells us the Pyrrhonist sceptic is moderate or humble almost by definition; because his goal is spiritual peace, he shuns the seeming chaos and uncertainty of all belief around him. And Montaigne hopes that "at least our faulty condition



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should make us behave more modestly and restrainedly in our changes."[58]

These claims for modesty are based on the premise that confrontation with beliefs differing from our own force us to reassess our own beliefs, and in this way promote humility and modesty. Such reassessment is humbling and restraining on the assumption that what motivates and guides human behavior are beliefs: if these beliefs are shaken by scepticism, then actions will be restricted as well.[59]

There is an objection to Shklar, and again it comes from Nietzsche. He, of course, claims it superficial and naive to think opinions are fundamental, that what really determines action is not reason, and not belief, but rather the will. And scepticism - the manly, strong variety of scepticism he describes, frees the will from belief's constraint. And this kind of scepticism is anything but humbling. Who should we believe then? Shklar, Montaigne and Sextus, or Nietzsche?

There might be less of a disagreement here than first appears. Nietzsche's thought is, of course,



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characterized by a perpetual clash of opposites, and so it might seem he thinks scepticism may both lead to moderation and unbridled excess; both may be concurrent possibilities. After all, Nietzsche writes, "the same conditions that hasten the evolution of the herd animal, also hasten the evolution of the leader animal."[60] And indeed, as we have seen, Nietzsche distinguishes between two kinds of scepticism, one of strength and one of weakness. But despite this duality, ultimately it seems that Nietzsche thinks that scepticism will more likely lead to widespread levelling, or humbling effects than unleashing, ruthless ones. For he expends great energy persuading that the leader animal will come upon the earth: Nietzsche has to bring us the Superman; he does not come of his own accord alone.

**Scepticism and Indifference**

Nonetheless, even if we are convinced that scepticism has greater psychological affinities to humility or modesty, this still does not tell us what



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kind of politics scepticism will more likely imply, for modesty or moderation is a very ambiguous virtue. It is far from clear what kind of citizen would be formed by such a virtue alone. We can imagine a modest character as compatible with almost every political possibility, whether it be liberal, illiberal or entirely apolitical. Liberal citizens may be moderate ones, but Tocqueville also describes for us equally moderate citizens who are perfectly content to live under despotism, largely because they are indifferent to political life.

And in fact, rather than unleashing the will to illiberalism, this last possibility, the association between quietude, or political indifference, is the most common one in the history of scepticism. Describing the life of a Pyrrhonist, Sextus Empiricus claims that "we coherently follow, to all appearances, an account which shows us a life in conformity with traditional customs and the law."[61] The ancient sceptic follows the rules both because his doubts leave him no other guides to conduct, but also because he is concerned with inner tranquility, not politics. And



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Sextus Empiricus' writings are particularly striking for the entire absence of any treatment of politics at all. Similarly, Montaigne advises that "it is the rule of rules, and the universal law of laws, that each man should observe those of the place he is in,"[62] and that one should look inward for tranquility rather than to expect such an outcome from politics.[63] Descartes is also in agreement with Montaigne and Sextus, advising that his sceptical seeker of certainty "obey the laws and customs of [his] country,"[64] and though there is scholarly debate about the extent of Descartes' political intentions, it is striking that his writings, like those of Sextus, are characterized by an almost complete silence about politics.

Thus, scepticism again reveals itself as a very ambiguous phenomena. It necessarily leads neither to liberalism or illiberalism. And the modesty or humility which it may generate is equally ambiguous. But if we are to look for the dangers of scepticism, from our considerations of sceptical modesty, we see that we will likely find them in indifference rather than in the inspiration of tyrants.



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[1] *Human All too Human*. trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, 1986), Vol. 1.21, p. 23.

[2] Scepticism is also generally defined in two other ways. Sometimes it is seen as exclusively dealing with epistemological questions. For students of political theory, epistemological scepticism itself is not of fundamental interest. Moreover, in the history of scepticism epistemological doubt is generally concomitant with moral doubt as well (the only possible exception, in fact, would perhaps be Descartes, But even in Descartes epistemological concerns - especially his famous problem of the existence of the external world - are not separate from moral ones, for all of Descartes' doubting is to culminate with a moral end - to prove a scientific and irrefutable code of ethics.)

Scepticism is also often defined as political scepticism, a suspicion of political power and those who might wield it. (For such a treatment, see Michael Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith & The Politics of Scepticism* (Yale, 1996).) But political scepticism is also often linked to philosophical scepticism - as we shall see in the case of Shklar, and as one can even see in Oakeshott's writing. Oakeshott, for example writes that "the politics of scepticism may be said to have its roots either in the radical belief that human perfection is an illusion, or in the less radical belief that we know too little about the conditions of human perfection for it to be wise to concentrate our energies in a single direction by associating its pursuit with the activity of governing."(Ibid., p.30) This essay is not about political scepticism, but rather an attempt to understand the possible implications of deeper philosophical doubts.

[3] For present statements noting the absence of moral and political implications of scepticism, see, for example, Joseph Raz, "Liberalism, Skepticism and Democracy", in *Iowa Law Review*, Volume 74, (pp. 761-787). Also, Susan Mendus, *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism* (Humanities Press, 1989).

[4] *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford, 1975) Sect. 12, part II. p. 160.

[5] *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (Harvard, 1979) IX, Ch.11, p. 475.

[6] Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* trans. by Edwin Hamilton Gifford (Clarendon Press, 1903) 761d.

[7] Ibid. p.25.



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[8] "Scepticism and Toleration in the Seventeenth Century," in S. Mendus, ed. *Justifying Toleration* (Cambridge, 1988), p.21. Also "Optics and Sceptics," in *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe*, ed. E. Leites (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 235-265.

[9] *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, (Chicago, 1968) preface, p. x.

[10] *Beyond Good and Evil* trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Penguin, 1986), 208-9.

[11] Ibid. 209.

[12] *Natural Right and History, (Chicago, 1953), p. 3.*

[13] I:II, p.3.

[14] This point follows Albert Camus' interpretation of Nietzsche in *The Rebel*. (Vintage, 1956).

[15] *De La Sagesse* (Fayard, Tours, 1986.), p. 533. Translations are my own.

[16] Ibid., p. 555.

[17] Ibid., p. 560.

[18] Ibid., p. 582.

[19] Descartes à Elisabeth, September 1646, in *Oeuvres et Lettres* (Gallimard, Paris, 1953), p. 1223. Translations are my own.

[20] "Optics and Sceptics," p. 240.

[21] On Rorty's adoption of Shklar's liberalism of fear, see his *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989), p.74, 146.

[22] "The Liberalism of Fear," in Nancy Rosenblum, Ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Harvard, 1989), p. 30.

[23] Ibid. p. 23.

[24] Shklar writes, "putting cruelty *first*, is however, a matter very different from mere humaneness. To hate cruelty more than any other evil involves a radical rejection of both religious and political conventions." *Ordinary Vices*, (Cambridge: Belknap, 1984).

[25] Ibid. p. 30.

[26] Ibid.



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[27] Shklar writes, "a society governed by extremely oppressive skeptics can be easily imagined if, for example, they were to follow Nietzsche's political notions energetically." "Liberalism of Fear," p.25.

[28] *Essays*, trans. D. Frame, (Stanford, 1958), II:12, p.312.

[29] Ibid. p. 316.

[30] Ibid. p.307-8.

[31] In his *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. J. Annas and J. Barnes (Cambridge, 1994), Sextus Empiricus gives the example of those who faint while watching surgery while the patient bears the treatment: what is fundamental in our feelings, even in pain, are our opinions.(PH III:xxiv, 236, p.204)

[32] I:14, p. 38-9.

[33] I:14, p. 47.

[34] I:39 p. 174 also III:13, p. 817; III:11, p. 792.

[35] See *Liberalism Without Illusions* (Chicago: 1996), a collection of recent essays written in her honour.

[36] "Liberalism of Fear," p.28. The essays in Shklar's honor make clear that her scepticism was not merely political. For example, Bernard Yack describes her doubts writing, her "deep skepticism about our capacities for public and private rationality, was a scepticism reinforced by the extraordinary violence and irrationality of politics in twentieth-century Europe inspired her distinctive view of liberal politics," p.3.

[37] She writes, "For this liberalism the basic units of political life are not discursive and reflecting persons, nor friends and enemies, nor patriotic soldier-citizens, nor energetic litigants, but the weak and the powerful." "Liberalism of Fear", p.27.

[38] See Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley, 1979).

[39] *Democracy in America*, trans. G. Lawrence, (London: Harper & Row, 1969), V.II, Part I, Ch. 16, p.482.

[40] R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (London: Phoenix, 1992), p. 44.

[41] *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (Yale, 1980), p.368-9.



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[42] E.g. Sextus Empiricus writes:

> Ethiopians tattoo their babies, while we do not, the Persians deem it becoming to wear brightly-coloured full-length dresses, while we deem it unbecoming, Indians have sex with women in public, while most other people hold it shameful...in Persia homosexual acts are customary, while in some they are forbidden by law, that among us adultery is forbidden while among the Massagetae it is accepted by custom as indifferent..., that among us it is forbidden to have sex with your mother, while in Persia it is the custom to favour such marriages and in Egypt they marry their sisters, while among us is forbidden by law...Zeno does not rule out masturbation, which among us is condemned...tasting human flesh is among us unlawful but it is indifferent among entire foreign nations."(*Outlines of Scepticism,* I:148, III:207.)

[43] II:12, p.437.

[44] *Conversations,* op. cit., p.44, 115.

[45] *Justice as Impartiality* (Oxford, 1995), p. 172.

[46] Ibid.

[47] I:37, p. 169; also I:42, p. 193; II:17, p. 481; II:37, p. 598; III:8, p. 704.

[48] III:8, p. 709.

[49] III:8, p.705.

[50] III:13, p. 825.

[51] Rorty's ironism presents itself as very similar to scepticism. He writes that the ironist would have three main qualities: she would have radical and continuing doubts about the "final vocabulary she currently uses", she would realize that "argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts", and thirdly, "she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others."[51] This defines the sceptic: he suspends all judgement in moral argument, he tries to maintain a complete state of doubt about justifying or even the possibility of justifying moral principle.

[52] Ibid., p. 193.



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[53] For two illustrative criticisms of Rorty's position, see R. Bernstein, *The New Constellation* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991); J.B. Elsthain *Real Politics* (Johns Hopkins, 1997).

[54] "Liberalism of Fear," p. 25.

[55] For a recognition of Shklar's emphasis on political psychology see Stanley Hoffmann, "Judith Shklar as Political Thinker," in *Liberalism without Illusions*, pp.82-91.

[56] "Liberalism of Fear," p.25.

[57] *Liberalism, Ancient and Modern*, p. 8. On this interpretation of Strauss as a sceptic, see Dana Villa, "Arendt and Strauss" in *Political Theory*, Winter, 1998, pp.

[58] II:12, p.424.

[59] This is a view to which Hobbes gives formulation, that clash of opinion over good and evil is *the* source of conflict among men, that opinions are fundamental to behavior: "for the actions of men proceed from their opinions." *Leviathan*, (Penguin, 1968) ch.18, p.233.

[60] *WP* 956.

[61] *Outlines of Scepticism*, I.viii, p.7, I.xxxiii p.60.

[62] I;23, p.86.

[63] A recent study by David Schaefer questions the sincerity of Montaigne's conservatism. *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). Nonetheless, the vast majority of other commentators conclude that Montaigne's conservatism is genuine. See A. Boase, *The Fortunes of Montaigne*. (New York: Octagon Books, 1970.); H. Friedrich, *Montaigne*. trans. D. Eng. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Q. Skinner *The Founding of Modern Political Thought*. Vol. 2.(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.) pp. 275-284; J. , *Montaigne in Motion* trans. by A. Goldhammer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.); P. Villey, *Les Sources et L'Evolution des Essais de Montaigne*. 2 Vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1908.) The most extensive study of Montaigne's conservatism, which claims that it encompasses both his politics and religious views is found in F. Brown, *Religious and Political Conservatism in the Essais of Montaigne*. (Geneva: Droz, 1963).



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[64] *Discourse on Method*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge, 1984) Part III, sect. 23, p. 122.



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